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ABSTRACT

Journals have a long history as a means of self-expression, and they can be used as learning tools in adult education. Types of journals include the reader response journal or literature log, the learning journal, the reflective journal, and the electronic journal. Journal writing offers several benefits for adult learners: journals are less threatening and closer to natural speech; they document mental processes; and they can be used as a tool for growth through critical reflection. Obstacles to students writing reflectively include the following: their lack of proficiency with reflective writing, fear resulting from open-ended writing requirements, privacy issues, and unequal balance of power between teacher and students. To overcome some of the obstacles of open-ended assignments, students should be given some guidelines that answer such questions as the following: "What is a journal?"; "What do I write?"; "Why keep it?" and "How will it be used?" Four factors affect willingness and ability to reflect: individual developmental level, perception of the trustworthiness of the teacher, clarity and nature of the expectations of the journal, and quantity and quality of feedback. Several teaching strategies can be used to encourage reflection. Teachers can serve as mentors and coaches, steering adult learners to document their learning journey through journal writing. (Contains 18 references.) (KC)

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by Sandra Kerka

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Journal Writing and Adult Learning

The value of journal writing to a course with adult students cannot be overemphasized. (Sommer 1989, p. 115)

Journals and diaries have a long history as a means of self-expression. Several themes prevalent in adult learning—coming to voice, developing the capacity for critical reflection, and making meaning—are reflected in the way journals can be used in adult education. Journals are useful learning tools in a variety of adult education settings. Dialog journals, for example, have become popular in adult literacy and English as a second language classrooms. This digest focuses on several types of journals, exploring their value in assisting adults through their learning journey and summarizing advice from the literature on effective ways to use journals.

Types of Journals

One type is the *reader response journal* or *literature log*, in which learners record their responses to readings. Used on all levels from adult basic education through graduate study, such logs enable readers to enter the literature in their own voice (Perham 1992), placing themselves in relation to the text and discovering what they think about it. Over time, the log itself becomes another primary text to which they can respond (Perl 1994). Usually, entries are shared with the class, stimulating discussion. In one variation described by Perham, a looseleaf notebook accessible to the whole class becomes a collaborative journal in which learners and teacher make ongoing comments. Both Perham and Perl feel that these response journals have the power to build a community of learners though the process of critical co-reading and co-writing.

The *learning journal* is a systematic way of documenting learning and collecting information for self-analysis and reflection. When used in an adult education class, they can be more or less structured depending on the objectives and degree of self-direction of the learners. Examples from Schatzberg-Smith (1989), Oaks (1995), and Clark (1994) illustrate the wide range of learner levels and applications. Adult students in community colleges who are academically underprepared (Schatzberg-Smith 1989) use them to record their study habits and attitudes; through journal dialog with a more academically skilled adult, they receive support, insight, and feedback; learn to connect the abstract and the concrete; and develop metacognitive strategies they will need for higher education.

Distance learners lack the physical presence of co-learners for dialog and collaboration. At Empire State College (Oaks 1995), a structured learning journal replicates for distance learners many of the functions of a collaborative writing group. The learners are given specific questions that stimulate their journal entries and reinforce their movement through the writing process. In a sense, the journal substitutes self-dialog for communal discourse.

Clark (1994) explains how structured learning journals further the goals of experiential learning for gerontology students preparing to work on interdisciplinary health care teams. The ongoing developmental dialog in their journals is expressed through three types of entries: (1) observational notes, with little interpretation; (2) theoretical notes that attempt to make meaning of the observations and experiences; and (3) methodological notes, a "kind of written bulletin board" (p. 352) on which to post metacognitive reminders about the learning process.

The *reflective journal* is being widely used in the education of health care professionals as an instrument for the development of reflective practitioners. For example, nursing students may read fictional and nonfictional texts and write structured and free responses that facilitate connections between classroom and clinical experience and enable them to examine and clarify their attitudes about caring for patients (Fitzgerald and Weidner 1995). Such journals are "an intentional pause in their often technologically oriented studies" (ibid., pp. 7-8). Paterson (1995) discusses how nursing students' reflective journals are a place in which to practice ways of knowing and envision new ways of thinking and responding. They empower students to challenge the status quo and disagree with teachers, giving them a safe place in which to try out and defend their ideas.

Reflective journals are also used in the preparation of adult educators. Cognitive activities stimulated by this type of journal include observation, speculation, doubt, questioning, self-awareness, problem stating, problem solving, emoting, and ideation (Holt 1994). The reflective dialog journal becomes a professional conversation between the mentoring teacher educator and the preservice teacher trainee (McAlpine 1992).

Electronic journals are being used in distance education and other settings. McIntyre and Tlusty (1995) explain how preservice teachers conducted a reflective dialog on teaching practice using electronic mail. As with many computer-oriented learning situations, the biggest problems were discomfort with the technology or difficulties in access. However, electronic dialog journals increased collegial relationships with teacher education supervisors and provided moral support for isolated student teachers through joint reflection on practice.

Benefits for Adult Learning

Why should adult learners keep journals? According to Schneider (1994), journal writing is closest to natural speech, and writing can flow without self-consciousness or inhibition. It reveals thought processes and mental habits, it aids memory, and it provides a context for healing and growth. Journals are a safe place to practice writing daily without the restrictions of form, audience, and evaluation (Sommer 1989), one reason for their popularity in adult basic education/English as a second language. They are a less formal, less threatening way for older reentry learners to approach writing in a course, to "talk" in a way they might not in class (Grennan 1989).

Journal entries can provide tangible evidence of mental processes. They make thoughts visible and concrete, giving a way to interact with, elaborate on, and expand ideas. Clark (1994) and Grennan (1989) explain how journal entries demonstrate movement through Kolb's modes of experiential learning: recording a concrete experience or feeling, reflecting on and observing the experience, integrating the observation into abstract concepts or theories, and using the theories to make decisions and solve problems.

Journals are tools for growth through critical reflection, for it is not enough to observe and record experiences, but "equally important is the ability to make meaning out of what is expressed" (Clark 1994, p. 355). Writing is a critical ingredient in meaning making, enabling learners to articulate connections between new information and what they already know. The journal becomes another text on which to reflect, but it is a text written in the

learner's authentic voice, and this personal engagement adds a necessary affective element to the learning process.

Using Journals Effectively

Of course, merely writing in a journal does not automatically ensure critical reflection or other learning outcomes, as several studies have shown. Six of the 10 adult educators who kept reflective journals in Holt's (1994) study did not find them helpful; the journals served more as a recordkeeping than a learning tool. Holt concluded that either the guiding questions they were given did not motivate reflection or they did not know how to write reflectively. Three nursing education studies (Fitzgerald and Weidner 1995; Miller et al. 1994; Paterson 1995) found that students wrote more descriptively than reflectively; some resisted journals as "busy work," or their writing slacked off after initial enthusiasm. Journal entries by teacher trainees (Surbeck, Han, and Moyer 1991) were classified in three stages: reaction/response, elaboration, and contemplation; however, few entries reached that third, reflective stage. These examples show that proficiency with reflection is a key to success.

Sommer (1989) identifies another potential difficulty: "as a completely open-ended assignment, journals are doomed to failure" (p. 115). In fact, much of the resistance of Grennan's (1989) students to journal writing was connected to open endedness. Similarly, nursing students (Miller et al. 1994) found it difficult to know what to write about.

A third area of concern is related to privacy and the teacher-learner relationship: "How can you encourage students to write freely and also require them to share what they have written?" (Sommer 1989, p. 116). There is also the danger that learners will write what they think the teacher wants to see (Paterson 1995). An aspect of journal writing that can inhibit its potential to stimulate learning "is the learner's perception of the educator's role and any position power imbalance that implies" (Cranton 1994, p. 180). For example, in dialog journals they might feel overpowered by the instructor's voice if traditional power relations are maintained (Roe and Stallman 1993).

To overcome the terrors of the blank sheet of paper that open-ended journals present, learners should be given some guidelines:

- *What is a journal?*—describe for learners the various types and formats.
- *What do I write?*—give specific exercises or guiding questions. For example, What did you learn today and how will you apply that learning in practice? List 100 people who have touched your life; select one and carry on a journal dialog with him/her (Paterson 1995; Walden 1995).
- *Why keep it?*—explain the variety of purposes, including a memory aid, learning documentation, tool for negotiating the curriculum with teachers (Grennan 1989).
- *How will it be used?*—discuss whether and how it will be shared with the class or with the teacher only; whether it will be for personal use only, or to generate material for other assignments; explain that it will not be "graded" for writing style, grammar, or content, but in some cases a regularly maintained journal may count as part of the overall assessment (Paterson 1995).

Paterson identifies four factors that affect willingness and ability to reflect: (1) individual developmental level; (2) perception of the trustworthiness of the teacher; (3) clarity and nature of the expectations of the journal; and (4) quantity and quality of feedback. Cranton (1994) provides some strategies to encourage reflection:

- Have learners use one side of a page for observations and descriptions and the other for thoughts, feelings, related experiences, and images stimulated by the description.
- Suggest a theme or perspective to be explored, such as "my role as a professional."
- Suggest that learners establish a routine for journal writing.
- Propose experiments with various styles. Schneider's (1994) examples include writing letters to a friend, letters to an authority figure, letters to yourself when older or younger; record dreams, drawings, doodles; write dialogs between yourself and someone no longer in your life or one of your dream images; make lists.

Either through dialog entries or the way journals are presented and used, the teacher should function as a "'metaguide,' helping the learner to focus on the reflective moment" (Paterson 1995, p. 219). In the roles of coach, mentor, and dialog partner, adult educators can serve as the "seasoned traveler" steering adult learners to document their learning journey through journal writing.

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